

FACULTY FOR ACADEMIC FREEDOM & AGAINST ANTISEMITISM

OPEN LETTER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS BOARD OF TRUSTEES

May 23, 2024

We are writing as the executive committee of a new faculty organization, *Faculty for Academic Freedom & Against Antisemitism* (FAFAA). We are a growing voluntary association of 65 current and emeritus University of Illinois faculty members from multiple disciplines across the three campuses. We organized in response to the wave of antizionist antisemitism¹ that has swept across campuses in North America and Europe following the brutal murders, rapes, mutilations, and abductions carried out by Hamas paramilitary terrorist forces near the Gaza border in Israel on October 7, 2023. Our website is under development at <http://fafaa.net>. It includes our mission statement and a collection of resources about antisemitism on US campuses.

We write out of grave concern over the upsurge of antisemitic activity on and off American campuses that immediately followed the October assault and specifically with the antisemitic impact of the national movement to establish “Gaza Solidarity Encampments” across scores of US campuses. The encampments began in mid-April and rapidly spread to Champaign-Urbana, Chicago, and across the country. Some of our UIC students joined the encampment at the University of Chicago. The encampments were largely organized by Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP) and Faculty for Justice in Palestine (FJP), two fiercely antizionist national groups with local chapters in both Chicago and Champaign-Urbana. Analysis based on AMCHA’s extensive database of campus incidents shows a high correlation between the presence of an SJP chapter and the prevalence of incidents denigrating Jewish identity (<https://amchainitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Assault-on-Jewish-Identity-Report.pdf>).

SJP has been active for a number of years. FJP is new. Both groups promote the familiar ahistorical disregard for the three-thousand year presence of Jews in the Holy Land, insisting instead that the state of Israel is the product of modern white European colonialism. But the manifesto issued by the UIUC FJP chapter adds its own damaging innovations, among them a call for its members to refuse any professional cooperation, including required committee service, with campus colleagues who identify with Zionism. FAFAA’s co-chairs published an essay in the refereed journal *Fathom* about FJP, with emphasis on the manifesto distributed on Instagram by the CU chapter (<https://fathomjournal.org/author/cary-nelson-and-brett-kaufman/>).

¹ The term “antizionist antisemitism,” borrowed from recent scholarship, identifies the specific form of antisemitism that has arisen in response to the creation of the Jewish state. It also points to the increasing fusion of the two impulses in the current scene.

The UIUC FJP manifesto is arguably the most virulently antisemitic statement issued by any FJP chapter in existence at the time.

SJP and FJP are defined by their well-coordinated hostility to Illinois students, staff, and faculty who believe that Jews have a right to a state in their ancient homeland. Their support for Hamas post-10/7 raises that hostility to a dramatically new level. SJP/FJP would deny the Jewish state its right to defend itself, a categorically anti-Jewish stand after 1948. But they don't simply oppose Israeli policies; they oppose Israel's right to exist. Their campaign to promote that ideological agenda presents a long-term threat to the right that Jewish community members and others have to an educational environment free of harassment, intimidation, and discrimination. For those who consider a commitment to Israel's right to political self-determination to be part of their personal identity, growing antizionism is no longer an exclusively political phenomenon. It is an antisemitic assault on their identity.

While academic freedom gives SJP and FJP members the right to engage in what clearly constitutes hate speech, it imposes no expectation that the university administration and trustees should remain silent in response. Indeed, hate speech and discrimination against a minority demand a strong counter-response. The proliferation of SJP/FJP direct and inspired antisemitic hate speech on a campus requires both forthright immediate condemnation and long-term educational planning and programs to counter its effects.

While we cannot know exactly what we will face in coming months, especially since protests may depend on what happens in Gaza and Israel and will likely be influenced by opportunities presented by the US presidential campaigns, it is in any case necessary to plan for what is likely to prove an ongoing increase in antisemitic activity on many campuses over the long haul. Although people may not agree with every one of its recommendations, the May 2024 "Best Practices and Principles: Free Speech, Academic Freedom, and Responsibilities," jointly issued by Hillel International and the Academic Engagement Network, includes a guide to protecting the right to demonstrate while enforcing rules against disruption of basic campus functions (https://academicengagement.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/AEN-and-Hillel-Best-Practices-May-2024_final.pdf).

Past experience and recent events give reason to anticipate that courses in 2024-25 and thereafter may include persistent antizionist proselytizing by some Illinois faculty members, thereby improperly using faculty authority to pressure students into adopting their political views. Such practices risk replacing education with indoctrination. Spring 2021 saw Illinois academic programs for the first time issuing formal statements condemning the character and existence of the world's only Jewish state. The UIUC faculty senate issued a December 2022 recommendation against departmental statements on external political issues (<https://senate.illinois.edu/GuidelinesDepartmentalStatements20221205.pdf>), but it had little impact on faculty members convinced of their moral and political virtue. The number of academic units issuing such statements increased during the current academic year. The policy

statements have a coercive, chilling effect that is especially intense for students and untenured or contingent faculty members. And they may encourage faculty to include antizionist advocacy in classes having nothing to do with the Middle East. Moreover, they can lead to political bias in recruitment, hiring, and personnel decisions. They send a message to the public that the university is not a neutral space for discussion and debate.

A clear warning sign that faculty political advocacy was improperly infiltrating professional responsibilities occurred this spring when a UIUC professor began adding personal support for the “Gaza Solidarity Encampment” to her signature on university email messages. That meant that a student or colleague who emailed her would receive a political message in response. The message implicitly urged others to join her. What’s more, it set aside the responsibility to answer student emails so she could support the encampment.

Still more troubling were the group statements issued by UIC and UIUC programs and departments. Days after the October 7th attack by Hamas on Israel, before Israel responded militarily, UIC faculty in the Women and Gender Studies, Black Studies, Global Asian Studies, and all seven student cultural centers (including those serving the disabled and women) posted statements on their websites to let Palestinian and Muslim students know that faculty members were concerned for their welfare. The academic departments denounced “the ongoing escalation of settler colonial violence” and expressed solidarity with those “targeted by colonialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, ableism and state-sanctioned violence.” There was no mention of antisemitism, Hamas, the terrorist killings, or the 252 hostages taken, and no mention of support for the trauma of Jewish and Israeli students. The only gesture toward October 7 they are willing to make is to “mourn the loss of life in southern Israel.” The university administration has allowed those political statements, very alienating to Jewish students and faculty, to remain on websites supported by state funds. Some Jewish students feel uncomfortable accessing student support centers to which their tuition payments should give them equal access.

On December 18 three UIUC academic programs—African-American Studies, Gender and Women Studies, and Latina/Latino Studies—released a comparable policy statement. It condemns “Israel’s ongoing genocide and occupation of Palestine,” taking a formal department stand on what should be matters for open discussion and debate, not preordained department truths. The modifier “ongoing,” moreover, especially when paired with the claim Gaza is “occupied,” suggests the three programs may believe the “genocide” predates the current military campaign. After condemning anti-Palestinian sentiment (without making it clear whether UI peers and administrators are included in the accusation), it concludes “We offer our classrooms as a space for you to take refuge and find the strength to change the world together.” Since such programs do not ordinarily offer courses on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the impression is given that classes having nothing to do with the subject will be substantially given over to opportunities to disseminate the controversial views of department faculty. Subsequently removed from the department website, the letter’s damaging message remains in circulation.

We are issuing this open letter to urge you to initiate the planning now for implementation during the 2024-2025 academic year. The planning should include a review of available courses on all three campuses on antisemitism and on Jewish history and culture to assure that a politically diverse curriculum is available going forward. Courses can discuss the wisdom of policies adopted by Israel and other countries. A course syllabus can cover current political controversies, including the contentious debates over Israel's history and status as a nation. But a campus should not have courses designed to indoctrinate students with a passion to eliminate the Jewish state. And if every class on Israel serves that agenda then the campus as a whole has lost sight of its responsibility to educate students so they can make up their own minds.

The university should also initiate discussion about the possibility of adopting the IHRA Definition of Antisemitism—not as a speech code or a disciplinary code but as an educational tool and as a way to assess the overall campus climate. To quote from a recently published suggestion about how a university could announce IHRA adoption:

It will not be used on campus as a quasi-legal invitation to disciplinary proceedings against students, staff, or faculty. Nor will it be used to justify cancelling events arranged by student or faculty groups. However, we believe its eleven examples provide an extremely helpful guide to the main forms of contemporary antisemitism. The goal of the working definition is not to shut down conversations but rather to illuminate them with understanding.

At the federal level, the US State Department has been using the IHRA definition since the Obama administration. The Office of Civil Rights in the United States Department of Education has joined in. That Office recently issued a statement describing the legal standards used by the federal government to investigate complaints that universities are not in compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The statement observed that Presidential “Executive Order 13899 provides that federal agencies ‘shall consider’ the non-legally binding IHRA definition of antisemitism and accompanying examples of antisemitism ‘to the extent that’ any such ‘examples might be useful as evidence of discriminatory intent.’” The federal government’s reliance on the IHRA definition suggests it would be useful for the University of Illinois to consider adopting it. Without a definition giving major categories to use in identifying possible antisemitic statements, how can administrators, faculty, and students know what antisemitism is and learn how to avoid it?

We realize this is an ambitious agenda that will not be easy to implement. It will take considerable education to convince the campuses that its components are needed.

We were very lucky in Illinois not to face a violent mass confrontation between police and demonstrators. The authorities were wise to withdraw after meeting resistance, thereafter allowing the UIUC encampment to dissolve over time rather than risk a major crisis. We did not face building occupations and property destruction. Nevertheless, there were activists on site instructing our students on how to physically resist arrest, criminal actions that would have

guaranteed the violence they sought. Going forward, we should increase awareness of best practices for nonviolent protest and civil disobedience.

It is a conceptual and analytic error, moreover, to limit our understanding of the threat to pro-Israel and Jewish community members to events in our local areas. Pamphlets urging that students resist arrest and break into locked buildings were distributed nationally. Aggressive “Genocide” and “Death to Israel” chants did not occur everywhere, but they circulated online and in videos. Meanwhile, slogans like “Palestine will be free, from the river to the sea” and “Globalize the Intifada” acquired an eliminationist meaning in the wake of the October 7 massacre; they were chanted everywhere. The rhetoric of the encampments had international reach. Illinois students thus faced nationwide threats and challenges to their identities and religious beliefs. Local events echoed sentiments expressed everywhere else.

Many do not realize what anguish many Jewish students have endured since the October 7th Hamas atrocities inspired a wave of antisemitism on campus. According to a poll of Jewish students around the nation just released by Hillel, 61% of Jewish students say there has been threatening or derogatory language toward Jewish people during protests at their school. And 40% have felt the need to hide their Jewish identity from others on campus. Many students have stopped wearing stars of David or Hebrew lettering on clothing; and some have stopped attending Jewish religious and social events. Many believe that the university treats calls for violence against Jews far less seriously than if directed against other minority groups.

Moreso now than at any other recent time, antisemitism is embodied in national movements. That places a much larger burden on Illinois campus administrations, on the Board of Trustees, and on the faculty than we have faced before. FAFAA is prepared to comment on events, to offer advice, and to provide assistance if asked. One of our members organized an important conference on antisemitism on May 1. We would be happy to present its key findings to the Board.

We are grateful for your actions that helped the UIUC campus, in particular, to function in the spring. We hope that being proactive will facilitate a better Fall (and subsequent) semesters.

SIGNED—The FAFAA Executive Committee:, on behalf of our 65 members: Yuliy Baryshnikov, Lee DeVille, Brett Kaufman (co-chair), Cary Nelson (co-chair), Barbara Risman, Richard Ross, Helaine Silverman